DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 474 UD 021 560

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TITLE Can Racial Attitudes Be Changed? Synopis.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 19p.: Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (7th, Vancouver, March, 1981): For a related document, see UD 021 509.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change: *Black Students: *Cultural Awareness: Cultural Education: Elementary Education: Ethnic Groups: Foreign Countries: *Indians: *Racial Attitudes: Racial Relations: Student Attitudes: *White Students
IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

The attitudes of white Canadian fifth and sixth graders toward blacks and East Indians were examined by means of a semantic differential measure, a social distance scale, and a contact questionnaire. No significant differences in attitudes were found between students in schools with a high and low proportion of black and East Indian students. White students in both types of schools revealed highly negative attitudes towards the two minority groups. Compared to white students, black and East Indian students showed less positive cognitions of and greater social distance toward their own ethnic groups. The implementation of a cultural program focusing on aspects of East Indian culture through folk dance, music, and crafts resulted in improved racial attitudes toward East Indians in white students. In East Indian students the program brought about improved cognitions toward their own ethnic group. The effects of the program were maintained three months later. (Author/APM)

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JUN 3 1981

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CAN RACIAL ATTITUDES BE CHANGED?*

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Synopsis of the presentation made at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Seventh Annual Conference of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR), Vancouver, March 1981.

* This paper summarizes some of the findings of the author's doctoral dissertation research conducted at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.

UD 021560

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CAN RACIAL ATTITUDES BE CHANGED?

Abstract

The attitudes of white Canadian fifth- and sixth-graders toward blacks and East Indians were examined by means of a semantic differential measure, a social distance scale and a contact questionnaire. No significant differences in attitudes were found between students in schools with a high and low proportion of black and East Indian students. White students in both types of schools revealed highly negative attitudes toward the two minority groups. Compared to white students, black and East Indian students showed significantly less positive cognitions of and greater social distance toward their own ethnic groups.

The implementation of a cultural program focusing on various aspects of the East Indian culture through the medium of folk dance, music and crafts resulted in significantly improved racial attitudes toward East Indians in white students. In East Indian students the program brought about improved cognitions toward their own ethnic group. The effects of the program were maintained three months later.

Education and Racial Attitudes

Racial attitudes of elementary school children are of great concern in a multiethnic country such as Canada with large numbers of immigrants belonging to visual minority groups, since it is largely at this age level that the foundations are laid for the ethnic attitudes of adolescents and adults. To date no studies have been performed in Canada to determine the ethnic attitudes of white elementary school children toward blacks and East Indians nor have any systematic investigations been carried out within the Canadian context to evaluate the effect of interethnic contact and conformity proneness on ethnic attitudes.

Empirical evidence regarding the effect of education on changing ethnic attitudes is inconclusive. Previous research findings (e.g. Elrod, 1968; Hayes and Conklin, 1953; Katz, 1952; Kraus, 1960; McNeil, 1960) appear to suggest that educational measures focusing exclusively on the imparting of knowledge about another culture or on the nature of prejudice are relatively unsuccessful in promoting positive ethnic attitudes and in bringing about attitudinal change. On the other hand, instructional programs which focused on cultural similarities and included an opportunity for majority group members to emotionally identify with members of the minority group (e.g. Leslie, Leslie, and Penfield, 1972; Litcher and Johnson, 1969; Salyachivin, 1972, 1973) have been found to be more successful in developing positive intergroup attitudes.

The Contact Theory

How important actual interethnic contact is for the development of positive racial attitudes has not been resolved. Empirical research findings on attitude change as a result of interethnic contact are inconsistent. While Koslin, Amarel and Amarel (1969), Jansen and Gallagher (1966), Mann (1959), and Singer (1964) ascertained attitude change in school children as a result of interethnic contact, no such change was found by Kupferer (1954), Lombardi (1963), Smith (1969) and Wade and Wilson (1971). Other researchers (Beecher, 1970, cited in Wineberg, 1970; Webster, 1961) even noted more prejudice following interethnic contact than before.

Previous findings seem to suggest, however, that close contact and regular social interaction between majority and minority group members may result in improved ethnic attitudes provided some or all of the following criteria are met (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Cook, 1969): (1) equal status of interacting individuals; (2) an opportunity for genuine acquaintance potential (i.e., interethnic contact has to occur on a personal rather than on a casual basis); (3) activities that involve common superordinate goals and necessitate intergroup cooperation; (4) general pleasantness of the contact situation; (5) support of interethnic contact by persons and/ or institutions in authority positions; and (6) contact with high-status members of the minority group.

The Conformity Theory

The theory of conformity proneness holds that group norms prevailing in a society are largely responsible for a person's values, social attitudes and behaviour. Ethnic attitudes, like other social attitudes, are learned and vary with socio-cultural, situational and personality differences. A child's racial attitudes may be acquired through straight transmission of values from adults, older siblings, and peers. They may be based on direct observation of inter-racial events which cast the members of an ethnic group in a negative light, or they may develop through subtle and unconscious assimilation of the values prevailing in his social and cultural environment.

The Present Study

On the basis of the contact theory and the conformity theory it was hypothesized that a school situation which would favour racial integration and close interethnic contact, both in all aspects of students' and teachers' everyday interaction and through the overt support and immediate example of persons in authority positions (e.g., teachers, principal, parents), would be more likely to promote favourable racial attitudes than a school situation where an opportunity for physical inter-ethnic contact is not provided to the same extent, either due to the absence of a sufficiently large number of students belonging to the respective minority group(s) or

because social norms are felt to be present that are in favour of racial discrimination. Moreover, it was to be attempted to change students' attitudes toward East Indians in a positive direction by means of a cultural program with a special appeal to the students' feelings and emotions.

Design and Procedure

Altogether 170 White Canadian students* and 152 students belonging to other ethnic groups (8 Grade 5 and 8 Grade 6 classes) in two high-density (Hi D) and two low-density (Lo D) schools in Scarborough, Ontario, participated in the study. High-density as opposed to low-density schools were defined as schools in which thirty and eleven percent respectively of the school population belonged to the black and East Indian ethnic groups. These two contrasting situations, although arbitrarily designated as 'High' and 'Low' density, are believed to represent the two extremes in the composition of the student population in the Scarborough elementary schools with respect to these two ethnic groups.

* These included white Caucasian children of white parents who were born in Canada with English as their first language, and children of white British parents who were either born in Canada or Britain and who had English as their native tongue.

A cultural program consisting of nine weekly sessions of approximately seventy minutes' duration each and focusing on various aspects of the East Indian culture through dance, music and crafts was implemented by a dancer/teacher indigenous to that culture. The program was implemented in two Grade Five and two Grade Six classes, with one each from a Hi D and a Lo D school (experimental group). The control group consisted of six Grade Five and six Grade Six classes with half of each belonging to Hi D and the other half to Lo D schools.

The children's ethnic attitudes were tested prior to the implementation of the program, immediately after its conclusion, and three months after its completion. Three measures were employed: a Semantic Differential Measure, the Bogardus Social Distance Scale and a Contact Questionnaire based on the one used by Henry (1978).

Results and Discussion

Three major sets of findings were obtained concerning (a) the nature of racial attitudes of White Canadian children toward the visible minority groups, (b) the self-concept of children belonging to the black and East Indian minority groups, and (c) the effect of the program implemented in this study on children's ethnic attitudes.

(a) Racial Attitudes

Our assumption, on the basis of the contact theory, that Hi D schools would provide a greater opportunity for close interethnic contact and social interaction between white children and members of the visual minority groups than Lo D schools, and that they would stress racial integration more forcibly, and consequently promote more positive racial attitudes than Lo D schools failed to be supported. No significant differences in attitudes toward blacks and East Indians were found between White Canadian children attending the two types of school. In both settings the racial attitudes of white children proved to be highly negative (Table 1).

Blacks were evaluated somewhat more positively than East Indians. A clear distinction emerged between "Indian Canadians" and "Pakistani Canadians" with the latter group being evaluated significantly more negatively than the former. This picture seems to reflect recent social trends in the larger community as a whole which have been characterized by a shift from blacks to East Indians as the targets of racial prejudice. In many instances Pakistani Canadians, in particular, have been singled out as the object of racial discrimination, slurs, name calling and physical abuse. Since immigrants from India and Pakistan belong to essentially the same racial group and are little distinguishable in terms of facial features, they are usually referred to as one ethnic group. The term "Paki" is often used as a swear word which is collectively applied to both groups alike. This may explain why

the concept "Pakistani Canadians" was evaluated more negatively than "Indian Canadians."

(b) The Self-Concept of Black and East Indian Children

The results also revealed that children belonging to the black and East Indian minority groups evaluated their own ethnic groups considerably less positively, both on the Semantic Differential Measure and on the Social Distance Scale, than did White Canadian respondents. While this finding has to be viewed with caution, since no direct measure of self-concept was employed in this study, the children's evaluation of their own ethnic group allows certain conclusions with regard to their self-concept: it clearly suggeststhat black and East Indian children show considerably less liking for their own ethnic group than do White Canadian children.

It seems possible that the apparently low self-concept of black and East Indian children may be related to strong feelings of ethnicity by White Canadians and their low regard for members of the two minority groups. Such an interpretation would become supported by the views expressed by theorists such as Allport (1965), Ausubel and Ausubel (1959), Cooley (1942), Deutsch (1969), Kardiner and Ouesey (1957), Mead (1934), Pettigrew (1964) and Tannenbaum (1962) who maintain that the attitudes held by the majority group have a direct bearing on the self-image of minority groups and that they may prevent the development of a healthy self-image in members of the minority group.

(c) The Effect of the Program

The implementation of the cultural program resulted in significantly improved attitudes toward East Indians in all students exposed to it, regardless of age, grade, sex, ethnicity, and whether they attended a high-density or low-density school (Table 2). In East Indian students the program produced improved attitudes toward their own ethnic group. The effects of the program were maintained three months after its completion.

The program had four objectives: (1) to provide knowledge and information about the East Indian culture; (2) to elicit understanding of a number of aspects of the East Indian culture; (3) to create an awareness of similarities and differences between cultures and of the origins of cultural diversity; and (4) to emphasize that apparent cultural differences essentially constitute differential manifestations of similar human values.

The program* differed from traditional teaching approaches in a number of respects. The instructor was not a member of the regular teaching staff of the schools, but an artist/teacher indigenous to the East Indian culture who had been especially hired for this purpose. Teaching content differed from what is commonly

* Note: For a detailed description of the program see Ijaz and Ijaz (1981).

taught in the fifth- and sixth- grade Social Studies curriculum in that it focused on folk dance and music, art and crafts, and games. Above all, the program differed in its method of instruction. While a wealth of information was provided about India, this knowledge was not conveyed in the traditional classroom fashion of "input" followed by "recall." The prime strategy employed by the instructor was to immerse the students in situations that were typical of the Indian culture, to elucidate the meaning and significance of activities performed in such situations while, simultaneously, providing an opportunity for the students to identify with members of the target culture through role playing. In other words, 'content' was not only 'received' by the children at the cognitive/rational level of their consciousness, but the students were also provided with an opportunity to 'experience' it at the emotional and affective level. Thus learning was not confined to 'intellect', but involved all aspects of their personalities, rational, emotional, affective, and physical. Finally, 'learning content' was related to the children's own culture through 'transfer' of the values inherent in it, and thus provided meaningful application to their own lives.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest that elementary school children in their racial attitudes tend to conform to what is perceived to be the prevailing social norm. Since this norm is

evidently not felt to be effectively counteracted by the norms prevailing in the schools, the norms of society as a whole become the most powerful influence in shaping their views and perceptions of and attitudes toward visual minority groups.

The results of our investigation show a highly detrimental effect of prevailing racial attitudes of whites on the development of a healthy self-image of visual minority group children. They also clearly imply that our elementary schools such as they have traditionally operated in terms of curriculum content and teaching strategies contribute little or nothing to the development of positive attitudes toward other ethnic groups. Our findings are in keeping with those of Chabassol (1970) who evaluated the attitudes of adolescents in the Maritimes and who concluded that students perceived "the school as having had virtually no influence on their attitudes toward minority groups" (p.12).

On the other hand, the effectiveness of the cultural program implemented in this study in changing the attitudes of White Canadian children toward East Indians shows that racial attitudes <u>can</u> be changed. As Phyllis Katz (1976) puts it, "the twig that we so successfully bent can still be straightened".

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